



STATE OF TENNESSEE

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Altering gateway exams won't help student achievement.

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - Tennessee has a problem with student achievement in core high school subjects. Altering the way the state assesses high school students with Tennessee's Gateway exams will not solve the state's underlying problems with graduation, a new report by the Comptroller's Office of Education Accountability found.

Tennessee high school students have had to pass an exit exam to receive a diploma for about 20 years. Seniors of 2005, though, will be the first class required to pass Gateway exams in basic algebra, Biology I and English II to graduate. The Gateway exams are replacing the 8th grade equivalent Competency test.

"Gateway data from 2002-03 show a pass rate of 76.4% for the Algebra I exam. Passing rates for Biology I and English II exams were 95% and 87.3%, respectively," the report said. These numbers show that some students struggle with the new Gateway exams (particularly algebra) which are supposed to reflect the rigor of course work roughly aligned to the 10th grade.

African-American students and students for whom English is a second language routinely failed both the former Competency test and the Gateway exams at a higher rate than white, primarily English-speaking students, the report said.

Unlike Tennessee's previous graduation exams, the Gateways assist the state in complying with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The federal law requires states to test high school students in Gateway-tested subjects at least once between the 10th and 12th grades. The NCLB law does not require graduation-contingent tests or exams, leaving this decision to individual states. Tennessee is one of 20 states that have decided to link Gateway performance and receipt of a regular high school diploma.

The report includes the following recommendations:

Legislative recommendations:

- Commission a study of the state's graduation exam policy.

- Expand funding for remediation and early intervention programs to improve student achievement on the Gateway exams.

State Department of Education recommendations:

- Identify districts, high schools, and teachers with Gateway successes for emulation by other districts, schools, and teachers.
- Create a website to publish and disseminate best Gateway practices.
- Pilot a program or programs measuring the content of teachers' instructional practices.
- Evaluate local school systems to determine inclusion practices and capacity issues with regard to special education and ELL students.

State Board of Education recommendations:

- Formulate and standardize a uniform Gateway due process procedure for all students.

The report also gives the pros and cons of policy alternatives such as differentiated diplomas, alternative routes to graduation, lowering pass scores, deferring the exams, and leaving the policy unchanged.

The report is available on the Comptroller's Web site at www.comptroller.state.tn.us.